



# NEWS RELEASE

## Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources

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**SUBJECT:** Federal Law and PFD Use on Wisconsin Waters

**MADISON, Wis.** – The U.S. Coast Guard’s new lifejacket law requires all children under 13 to wear an approved, properly fitting lifejacket or PFD (personal flotation device) while underway in any recreational boat, except when the child is below decks or in an enclosed cabin.

It seems simple enough, but what exactly does it mean to Wisconsin boaters? Who enforces this relatively new law and where is it enforceable?

The federal lifejacket law is enforceable by the U.S. Coast Guard, National Park Service, or other federal enforcement agencies on the federal navigable waters that they patrol. Those include Lakes Michigan and Superior and the Mississippi River. Other popular boating spots that are considered federal navigable waters include Big Green Lake, Black River, Castle Rock Lake, Chippewa River, Lake Delton, Fox River, Kinnickinnic River, Koshkonong Lake, Menominee River, Pentenwell Flowage, St. Croix River, Wisconsin River, Wolf River, and the Winnebago system of lakes.

“Regardless of where you’re boating – or how old you are – our bottom line position is that everyone should wear a lifejacket or other PFD when they’re on the water,” said John Lacenski, boating law administrator with the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources. “It’s just common sense”

Wisconsin has over 15,000 inland lakes, 43,000 miles of rivers, and 650 miles of Great Lakes shoreline. With all the available surface water in the state, it is not surprising that recreational boating is a major part of Wisconsin’s outdoor recreational activities, as well as a significant part of the state’s economy and tourism industry.

Boat registrations have been rising since 1991, with nearly 620,000 watercraft registered in 2002. During that same time, boating fatalities in Wisconsin have ranged from a low of 15 (1995, 1998) to a high of 29 (1997). Last year, 19 people lost their lives boating in Wisconsin and only two of those victims were wearing a PFD.

“More and more people are enjoying our lakes and rivers,” Lacenski said. “And it’s no secret that lifejackets help save lives – but only if they are worn.”

When buying a life vest, Lacenski advises that you:

- Check for the “Coast Guard approved” label.
- Make sure the PFD offers a snug fit. Check weight and size on the label and try it on. For children, pick up your child by the shoulders of the PFD. The youngster’s chin and ears should not slip through the jacket.
- Make sure the lifejacket offers head support, especially for younger children. A well-designed PFD will support the child’s head when he or she is in the water.
- For younger children, buy a lifejacket with a strap between the legs because it helps prevent the PFD from coming off.
- Make sure you buy a lifejacket that’s comfortable. The more comfortable it is, the more likely it is that you’ll wear it.

“Today’s lifejackets are more comfortable and effective than ever before, there’s simply no reason not to wear one,” Lacenski said. “Whether the federal law applies to you or not, it’s just good, safe practice to wear a PFD.”